

CLEARINGHOUSE



COMMUNIST NOTES FROM THE ANTIPODES

October 2025

"You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting"

Clearinghouse is produced by a communist research collective scattered around the smallest continent. We intend to provide a variety of resources – starting with periodic reflections, reference lists, and conversations – all towards a better shared understanding of class conflict, accumulation regimes and geopolitics in the region and beyond.

web: clearinghouse.noblogs.org

mail: [clearinghouse \[at\] proton.me](mailto:clearinghouse@proton.me)

gram: [@clearinghouse77](https://www.instagram.com/clearinghouse77)

xitter: [@clearinghouse99](https://twitter.com/clearinghouse99)

Contents

03 | The Trump Tariffs: Some Notes from the Antipodes

Clearinghouse

23 | Who Are We?

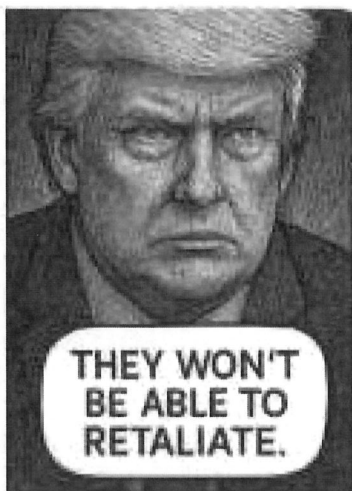
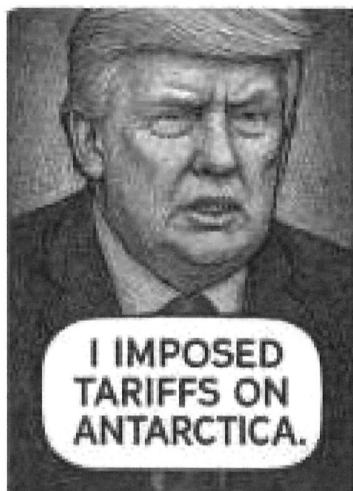
Réalité

27 | Alex G. Park (1990 – 2023)

Basalt Plains Collective

31 | Afterword to the Italian edition of *Red Dust*

Raffaele Sciortino



The Trump tariffs: some notes from the antipodes

Clearinghouse

This is a somewhat expanded version of the piece we wrote for the Heatwave dossier in May 2025. The geopolitical aspects of this question are crucial, and the saga—at least for now—seems endless. In recent months, Albanese has been feted in China, his government has paid the US state another AUD\$800 million towards nuclear submarines that (hopefully) may never be delivered, Trump has boasted that he is going to “sell so much” beef to Australia after biosecurity restrictions were lifted on its importation, and the local trade minister has warned that the new world of tariffs “risk[s] returning to the law of the jungle”. As of the beginning of August 2025, the tariff for Australia remains 10%. No doubt we will revisit this matter, in trying to make sense what it all means for class politics across the Indo-Pacific.

“You can’t believe how much fun we’re having”

—Trump aide

The Australian state is currently caught in a cleft stick, like so many of its Asian neighbours¹. Long a junior partner to the United States within the Asia-Pacific, it has provided a broad suite of military and intelligence support since the Second World War: from troops for US-led military conflicts (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan) through to bases for US military and regional surveillance. Most recently, the AUKUS agreement—supported by all major political parties—struck a deal for Australia to buy US-made nuclear submarines (that some commentators now fear may never arrive). Meanwhile, over the last fifteen years or so, China has overtaken Japan as Australia’s major trading partner², a situation common to economies across the region. Along with raw materials such as iron ore, gold and natural gas, a range of services are sold to China, including tourism and post-secondary education³. Despite some setbacks under the previous federal government, which led to a temporary exclusion of certain local industries from the Chinese market, this connection with the PRC is celebrated in Australian business and political circles alike as proof of a natural “fit” that epitomises the concept of comparative advantage. Thus it is no surprise to hear the head of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry stating recently that “It would certainly not be in Australia’s interest to be ... contemplating that we would impose trade measures in alignment with the United States”⁴. How best to maintain this *ménage à trois*, given the apparent rising tensions between China and the US, is a puzzle whose solution has so far eluded the Australian political class.

For us, the intertwined, yet conflicting, economic and political alliances with the US and China comprise the uneasy terrain within which Australia has responded to Trump’s recent tariff announcements. After the Trump administration levied a 10% flat

tariff on Australian goods, and 25% for aluminium and steel specifically, Prime Minister Albanese announced an initial 5-point plan on the 3rd of April:

1. Provide A\$50 million to peak bodies within sectors hit by tariffs, to aid in finding new markets
2. Establish an AUD\$1 billion economic resilience program to provide interest-free loans to enterprises wishing to take advantage of new markets and export opportunities.
3. Establish a critical minerals reserve - a stockpile of key minerals held back from export.
4. Prioritise Australian businesses in government procurement contracts.
5. Strengthen laws against commodity dumping⁵.

Albanese commented that “all these countries (United States, European Union, Canada, Japan, South Korea etc) are investing in their industrial base, their manufacturing capability and their economic sovereignty. This is not old fashioned protectionism or isolationism. It is the new competition.”⁶

Direct impacts to Australia’s trade with the US have been limited so far, with the US accounting for only 6% of Australia’s goods exports in 2023-24⁷. Services, which can't be tariffed as easily as goods arriving in a port, have been an increasingly important component of Australian exports to the US, although not yet on the scale of goods. However, 26% of Australia’s two-way trade is with China⁸, and while decreased exports to the US may not deeply affect primary producers in Australia, greater impacts may be felt if

the Chinese and Southeast Asian markets contract and demand for Australian goods and services declines⁹.

In the meantime, some Australian industries may benefit from the reconfiguring of global trade¹⁰. Currently Australia's most valuable goods export to the US is beef. Since the tariffs were announced, Australian beef exports to China have increased dramatically, filling the void left by the complete halting of US beef sales to China. Australian beef exports to China increased in February-March 2025, up 40% compared to the same period last year¹¹.

Australia's second largest goods export to the US is gold. While not directly related to the tariffs, gold prices have drastically increased over the last year as the gold fetishists in the world's Central Banks rush to buy up gold bullion. So far this has not led to increased investment in gold exploration in Australia. Instead, capital is flowing more rapidly into existing ventures, allowing mining enterprises to exploit known, lower-yield and depleted deposits that were previously too labour-intensive to mine profitably¹².

Australia already has unique protections in industries such as pharmaceuticals, medical devices, agriculture (particularly beef), and the much smaller steel and aluminium industries¹³. Also under threat is the media bargaining code which forces large companies to pay for hosting news in Australia, as well as the recent social media ban for children under 16. Silicon Valley technocrats despise these practices, and despite their occasional opposition to Trump, are fairly happy to see him on the attack. Critical minerals, especially in the context of Ukraine, are becoming more and more important in the looming tech/arms race. According to one site, "recently Japan, Korea and some European nations have either

signed agreements or started talks with the Albanese Government to secure access to Australian minerals.”¹⁴ Indeed, in the weeks following the initial tariff announcements there was talk of using the country’s considerable rare earths deposits as a bargaining chip with the US itself—in the first instance, as a means to reduce “reciprocal” tariffs.

Viewed from the perspective of the local dominant class here, the tariff regime may be less the central issue—especially as it remains unclear what commodities will still be subject to customs duties in three months’ time, and at what rate—than what (if at any) broader plans exist on the part of the US state for rejigging its complex relationship with China. If this is indeed the former’s long-anticipated move to finally and decisively decouple the PRC’s economy “from the upper segments of the world market to which Beijing continues to strive to secure access,”¹⁵ it seems to have been very poorly executed, to say the least. Not only is the whole thing chaotic and capricious, but Trump’s penchant for talking big with threats, only to back down, has not been lost on the CCP (or US Treasury bond markets, for that matter). Much will depend on whether the 10% tariff on Australian goods stays in place. If so, little may change for the local state’s economic and strategic policies in the region. As for the choices made by other Asia-Pacific social formations, many of which face similar dilemmas, we will have to wait and see, although increased commerce within the region itself seems probable. Finally, those fractions of local capital which have invested heavily in the US, such as the powerful superannuation industry managing almost \$US2.6 trillion in pension funds¹⁶, must be reassessing their offshore exposure

policies after disastrous losses on Wall Street following “Liberation Day”¹⁷.

As elsewhere, the Chinese government has made overtures to Australia, inviting Australia to “join hands” in solidarity with China in the face of the tariffs. During the recent election campaign, Defence Minister Richard Marles refused Ambassador Xiao Qian’s offer point blank, arguing that Australia should instead pursue deeper ties with Indonesia, India, the UK and the UAE (with the Prime Minister adding the EU to the list by late May¹⁸). However, other sources within the Federal government have hinted that trade with China could deepen, provided it happens on Australia’s terms¹⁹.

On the surface, it may appear that Australia’s relationship with the US is principally political, in contrast to its economic entanglement with China. However, despite China’s significant lead as Australia’s trading partner, the United States constitutes the country’s largest source of Foreign Direct Investment, comprising over 25% of total FDI²⁰. Moreover, the value chains that all three national formations are embedded within remain deeply globalised, despite the renewal of economic nationalism. Like other social formations in the region, Australia is largely subject to the fallout arising from the actions that bigger players enact as they jostle within the world market. Geopolitically, this is conceived in terms of leveraging Australia’s role as a longstanding “middle” power within the US global security system. For now, at least, the security alliance with the US seems to remain part of mainstream political “common sense,” although opinion polls suggest a marked “public” shift against it²¹. That said, even the opposition conservatives concede that “President Trump is somebody who is hard to predict, and we

need to be able to defend ourselves.’’²² The recent US bombing of Iran has tested the alliance, with Albanese’s support for the operation coming later than would usually be expected.

Tensions and openings

With the current absence of any collective subject within the region to serve as a reference point, talk of identifying “openings” strikes us as premature. As for identifying local and regional factors, this presumes a) a detailed mapping of the hierarchies of labour-power across the Asia-Pacific b) an understanding of the various regimes of accumulation and value chains operating there, and how these articulate with both the US and Chinese economies c) a materialist analysis of regional geopolitics informed by a) and b). To date we have yet to encounter even the beginnings of any such analysis in or about our wider region, which is both why we have started our own modest project, and are keen to engage with others pondering these same problems. It is also why, however inadequate our own provisional responses to *Heatwave*’s questions might be, we have thought it worthwhile to make some sort of initial contribution to what can only be a much broader collective process.

With that said, discontent around the cost of living (particularly housing, but also utilities) has been simmering within Australia since at least the outbreak of COVID in the ashes of the summer bushfires of 2019-2020²³. The extensive and intensive lockdowns in key parts of the country revealed for a brief moment the population’s dependence on so-called “essential service” workers, while exacerbating divisions between those who were able to receive a regular income while working from home, and everybody

else. Many contradictions surrounding “the Australian way of life” were already in plain sight by this point of time, and have only continued to feed this growing unease: the place of First Nations people within the polity; the sharp uptick in reportings of domestic violence; the meaning of “Australia the multicultural society”; growing portents of climate catastrophe (from floods to bushfires); debates around “appropriate” levels of migration; the degree of unpaid overtime for those in paid work; the difficulties facing the unwaged; increases in international tensions, from the genocide in Gaza to the war in Ukraine. However, so far the culture war tactics that have been so effective in mobilising a resurgence of right wing populism, particularly in the centres of the Anglophone world, have gained little traction. Aside from the “no” campaign that successfully thwarted the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament in 2023²⁴, the traditional right of the Liberal Party has failed to cohere into an appealing opposition, and no populist “far right” has moved in its place. Instead, “tough on crime” policies, including the expansion of prisons²⁵, have been taken up by the ALP. Furthermore, although a hostility to migrants has continuously simmered throughout Australia’s history, anti-migration sentiments haven’t expanded to the same extent as in many other high-GDP countries in recent years. Many among the political and capitalist classes are likely happy with this, for the time being, given the national economy’s great dependence on a steady supply of migrant labour, particularly from the Asia-Pacific.

Back in late 2020, one Italian friend flagged the challenges at that point facing efforts at “creating a general movement that, in starting from a particular terrain, is able to make one specific problem vital for the broad spectrum of the exploited.”²⁶ Leaving aside for the moment the question of how future processes of class

recomposition might actually be enacted, their ongoing absence has meant that discontent here has instead expressed itself in a number of (refracted? deflected?) forms, from a drop in support for both major parties, to a minor rise in union membership. Both the number of industrial disputes and the number of workers participating in them has risen since a more peaceful period from 2014–2020. Nevertheless, the average number of days lost to strike action hovers around 50,000 each quarter, indexing a plateau that has changed little since the GFC, and pales in comparison to the rates of the late twentieth century²⁷. Despite these simmering discontents, then, Australia in recent times has been notable for the absence of generalised struggles (organised or otherwise). This is markedly different to many of Australia’s Asian neighbours, particularly Indonesia, Kanaky and West Papua, where insurgencies, strikes and riots proliferate.

There is a lot to learn from the other articles in *Heatwave’s* tariffs dossier²⁸. For example, the *Réalité* collective notes that, deployed against US allies, tariffs may also be bargaining chips in support of seemingly “non-trade” matters, such as a commitment to increased defence spending (although even here, such investment is clearly of interest to America’s gargantuan arms manufacturing sector). Equally important is Raffaele Sciortino’s argument that, however ill-considered Trump’s use of the tariff weapon might be, it is at least a recognition that the post-Bretton Woods arrangements which once served the US so well are no longer a tenable means for maintaining US hegemony. Meanwhile, writing from Latin America, Conatus asks important questions about the connections between tariffs, social reproduction and borders, while Marco

Túlio Vieira and Charles Jr offer a portrait of the Brazilian social formation that in certain ways resonates with that in Australia. For its part, Chuang's contribution offers unique insights into what all this means for proletarians in China within a landscape of growing deindustrialisation, while stressing the importance of capital flight for future struggles within the region: "The trade war will likely spark a new wave of strikes and worker unrest in China, if it hasn't already. But the impact won't be limited to Chinese labor. We should also expect it to accelerate firms' plans to diversify their supply chains across Asia, with new hubs in Vietnam, Indonesia, and even India. As a result, new strike waves among the younger generation of workers will follow, just as they followed similar waves of industrial relocation throughout the 20th century in places like Italy, South Korea, and of course mainland China itself. But these are not overnight shifts. They unfold slowly, like a changing tide carving new contours into an old shoreline."

While economic nationalism continues to be the dominant ideology of the local union movement, the liberalisation of trade and subsequent downscaling of manufacturing since the 1980s has turned this strategy into an uphill battle, beginning with the abolition of tariffs in the domestic textiles, clothing and footwear sectors, and culminating in the destruction of local auto production in the late 2010s. However, even before Trump's re-election, the federal government had begun talking of reviving certain local manufacturing sectors under the slogan "Building a Future Made in Australia," in an effort to reverse decades of deindustrialisation following similar moves from Japan, South Korea, Canada and the US. Australia's peak union body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has welcomed the government's plans²⁹. This is unsurprising given the deep ties between the union bureaucracy

and the Labor Party. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) has likewise responded to the tariffs, calling on the government to mandate the use of Australian metals in all domestic infrastructure and energy projects³⁰. The Australian Workers' Union made a similar call³¹. AMWU has a particular focus on aluminium and steel industries, as well as advanced manufacturing and component production through small and medium enterprises. AMWU's response also included reference to the idea of "green metals," a discourse that is becoming more common in the global context of renewable energy transitions. Unions once again wish to guide the government's response, in the same way that AMWU and other unions responded to the Senate inquiry into the "Future Made In Australia" bill³². Thus, the consensus of Australia's political class seems consistent with Jamie Merchant's argument that the Trump tariffs are symptomatic of a global renewal of economic nationalism, signalling the decline of free trade and international cooperation toward economic competition between states, wherein tariffs are revived as a matter of national security³³.

As the dust settles following the Federal election on May 3rd that saw the Labor Party clinch a second term, Australia appears to be in a holding pattern, albeit an uneasy one. Rather than a slide rightward, the centre seems to be holding for now. In the terrain of economy alone, Australia's position within global value chains as an exporter of raw materials (most significantly of iron ore, coal and gas) has thus far provided a strong buffer against the economic turbulence of the 1990s and 2000s. As a consequence, the national economy recorded its first recession since 1991 only in 2020, before restoring growth in the years since. Nevertheless, given that FDI into Australia was \$4.7 trillion in 2023, some 181% of the

year's GDP³⁴, it seems fairly reasonable that Australian growth may suffer should the tariffs spur a widespread retraction of global investment, exacerbating the local economy's long standing problem of being notably "□ less complex than expected□ for its income level".³⁵ More work needs to be done on the nature of investment here, and the relative importance of value-productive industry versus large private equity firms and financial instruments/services. The tariffs remind us that, while at once a major source of its wealth, Australia's dependence on exports casts the fate of the national economy on the shifting sands of the world market, a totality which increasingly appears "to lurch from crisis to war."³⁶

Correspondence is welcomed at clearinghouse [at] proton.me

-
1. Saleha Mosin and Carter Johnson, "Markets are discovering the real Trump trade is 'Sell America.'" <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2025-04-21/trump-s-trade-war-puts-us-dollar-bonds-safe-haven-status-at-risk>
 2. Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "China Country Brief." <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/china/china-country-brief>
 3. Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "ChAFTA fact sheet: Trade in services." <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/agreements/in-force/chafta/fact-sheets/Pages/chafta-fact-sheet-trade-in-services>

4. Ronald Mizen, “The alarming next step in Trump’s trade war that has CEOs rattled.”
<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/the-alarming-next-step-in-trump-s-trade-war-that-has-ceos-rattled-20250410-p5lqr9>
5. Samantha Dick, “Albanese outlines five-point plan to respond to Donald Trump’s tariffs.”
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-03/albanese-outlines-five-point-plan-trump-tariffs-election-2025/105131590>
6. Anthony Albanese, “A future made in Australia: address to Queensland Media Club.”
<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/media-centre/a-future-made-in-australia-qmc>
7. Clint Jasper, “Here’s what Australia sells overseas, who buys it, and how much we sell to the US.”
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-04/us-tariffs-what-does-australia-export-trade-data/105045224>
8. Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “China Country Brief.”
<https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/china/china-country-brief>
9. Australian Bureau of Statistics, “International trade – supplementary information by calendar year.”
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/international-trade/international-trade-supplementary-information-calendar-year/latest-release>
10. One such example is a Northcote small business FastMag, specialising in the wholesale of Neodymium-based

magnets, which are one of the rare earth minerals subject to China's export restrictions. Found in products from everyday white goods to military hardware, such magnets are critical to US reshoring plans – or at the very least, their military production in preparation for a possible war over Taiwan. China's dominance of the rare earth market represents a critical chokepoint for global capital, and thus Australian-based companies such as Lynas Rare Earths are scrambling to increase production. Already Lynas is the largest producer of rare earths outside of China, and other Australian companies such as Alkane and Rio Tinto are looking to capitalise on government investment made available through the Future Made in Australia Bill (2024) to begin production.

See for example: Emilia Turzon, "Rare earth magnet crisis creates Australian opportunity out of US-China trade war." <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-06-12/rare-earth-magnet-crisis-creates-an-australian-opportunity/105404740>

11. Matt Bran, "Tariff war halts US beef exports to China as Australia fills the gap." <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-12/us-tariffs-war-with-china-australian-beef-exports-up/105166632>
12. Samuel Yang, "Inside Australia's new gold rush as miners cash in on record prices." <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-08/australia-new-gold-rush-driven-by-high-price-and-demand/105064920>
13. Emilia Turzon & Ahmed Yussuf, "As Trump's sweeping tariffs loom, here's what US trade looks like and where Australia fits." Pharmaceuticals, particularly blood

- products, have also been an important export to the US, and there have already been fears that the country's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme may in the future be targeted by Trump as an "unfair" barrier disadvantaging US Big Pharma. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-02/united-states-trade-deficits-surplus-australia-trump-tariff/105121634>
14. John Murtagh, "ACTU welcomes worker-focused response to unfair US tariffs." <https://psnews.com.au/actu-welcomes-worker-focused-response-to-unfair-us-tariffs/156820/>
 15. Raffaele Sciortino (2024), *The US–China Rift and Its Impact on Globalisation*, Haymarket, p. 4.
 16. Australia's superannuation funds are set to become the world's second largest pension pool in the world by 2031, overtaking Canada and Britain despite a substantially smaller population. See: Daniel Ziffer, "Australia soon to be second in world for retirement savings as superannuation pool soars" <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-02/australia-superannuation-retirement-savings/105098840> ; Super Members Council, "Australians' super savings on track to become second largest globally by the 2030s." <https://smcaustralia.com/news/australians-super-savings-on-track-to-become-second-largest-globally-by-the-early-2030s>
 17. Hugh Piper, "Australia Needs a Foreign Policy for its Superannuation Sector." <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/>

australias-needs-a-foreign-policy-for-its-superannuation-sector/

18. Jason Gregory, “Labor to reassess quota demands as a trade-off to strike EU free trade pact.”
<https://www.farmonline.com.au/story/8969764/eu-australia-free-trade-agreement-talks-restarted-at-leader-level/>
19. Tom Crowley & Stephen Dziedzic, “Australia will not join hands with China against Trump.”
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-10/australia-will-not-join-hands-with-china-against-trump/105159274>
20. Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Statistics on who invests in Australia” <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/trade-and-investment-data-information-and-publications/foreign-investment-statistics/statistics-on-who-invests-in-australia>
21. Jason Whittaker, “US independence day? Poll shows Australians’ radical shift over Trump, economy.”
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-27/yougov-poll-united-states-alliance-donald-trump-relationship/105210660>
22. Andrew Greene, “Shadow defence minister Andrew Hastie warns Australia can’t take US alliance for granted under Trump.” <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-23/andrew-hastie-doubts-us-alliance-under-trump-election-2025/105206576>
23. Such a cost of living ‘crisis’ has been fuelled by inflationary pressure that has its origins in COVID-19 era government expenditure (as well as capitalist profit seeking), which put

inflationary pressure on the Australian economy. Such expenditure included: a) the largest increase to social welfare payments ever, with a doubling in Jobseeker and student support payments, b) a new program called Jobkeeper to support businesses retaining employees in the absence of regular revenue (a form of government bailout by other means that was exploited by capitalists such as Harvey Norman) and c) a disastrous (from a non-house owning proletarian perspective) multi-billion dollar construction program entitled Homebuilder, designed to support the renovation and building of dwellings, but in actuality that revenue disproportionately flowed to middle and high income homes and ‘overheated’ the sector. For example: Daniel Ziffer, “Morrison government HomeBuilder scheme ‘overheated’ construction, blindsides states and lacked controls“ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-28/morrison-government-scheme-homebuilder-over-heated-construction/102521874> ; Australia Institute, “Corporate profits increase inflation – fact sheet.” <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/corporate-profits-increase-inflation-fact-sheet/>

24. Whilst the conservative element of the no campaign was the vast majority of it (as evidenced by traditionally conservative electorates dominated by the National Party having some of the highest levels of no votes in the country, such as Parkes in NSW, Maranoa in QLD, or Mallee in Victoria), there was also an influential dynamic of the Black Sovereign Movement, who argued against the

Voice from a position of Indigenous Sovereignty and refusal.

25. And also nationalisation of some prison management- such as Junee and Parklea in NSW (largely in response to deaths in custody) by the Minns Labor State Government, and the impending replacement of the private Port Phillip prison by the state-run Western Plains prison by the Allen Labor Government in Victoria. ↵
26. “Neopopulism as geopolitics: Nick Dyer-Witheford interviews Raffaele Sciortino.”
<https://projectpppr.org/populisms/ou4s4qbth74ibed4kkd1njv72pg40c>
27. Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Industrial Disputes, Australia”
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-working-conditions/industrial-disputes-australia/latest-release>
28. <https://heatwavemag.info/dossiers/tariffs/>
29. Australian Council of Trade Unions, “Response to Trump must be to protect and grow Australian jobs.”
<https://www.actu.org.au/media-release/response-to-trump-must-be-to-protect-and-grow-australian-jobs/>
30. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, “AMWU urges Federal government to shift industry policy after US steel, aluminium tariffs.”
https://www.amwu.org.au/amwu_urges_federal_government_to_shift_industry_policy_after_us_steel_aluminium_tariffs

31. Australian Workers' Union, "Australia can thrive through Trump's tariffs with decisive action."
<https://awu.net.au/national/news/2025/03/22308/australia-can-thrive-through-trumps-tariffs-with-decisive-action/>
32. Parliament of Australia, "Senate inquiry into the provisions of Future Made in Australia Bill 2024 and the Future Made in Australia (Omnibus Amendments No. 1) Bill 2024."
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Economics/FutureMadeinAustralia/Submissions
33. Jamie Merchant, "Tariffs as a Class Offensive".
<https://heatwavemag.info/dossiers/tariffs/jm-tariffs-052925/>
34. Australian Government, Australian Trade and Investment Commission, "Global ties and open markets – the gateway to wealthy Asia-Pacific markets and a solid opportunity base for global supply-chain enrichment."
<https://international.austrade.gov.au/en/why-australia/global-ties-and-open-markets>
35. Growth Lab, "Australia."
<https://atlas.hks.harvard.edu/countries/36>
36. Raffaele Sciortino and Robert Ferro, "Prolegomena on the 'system of states'," *Endnotes* blog.
<https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/robert-ferro-raffaele-sciortino-prolegomena-on-the-system-of-states>



Who Are We?

Réalité

Some thoughtful reflections on the importance of collective research today, from the comrades at Réalité.

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.”

— Philip K. Dick

Reality is what precedes us and what surpasses us; it manifests itself first and foremost as something already there, an irreducible constraint on the empire of the “I”. The march of the world did not begin with us, and will continue after us.

Reality is what resists us, or exists only by exceeding us: it constantly eludes our material and intellectual grasp. Too rich, too complex, too shifting—especially for a single person—it makes collective intelligence essential.

Reality is both what produces us and what fuels our hostility toward current society: specks of dust in the vastness of the world, we are nevertheless part of a self-contradictory reality, struggling against itself, often called “capitalism”. The old word communism, however outmoded and inadequate it may be, still embodies the possible resolution of this tension.

At the same time, reality is what puts us back in our place every day: it causes our projects to fail and mistreats our aspirations. Reality embodies the experience of the limit, without which there can be no consistent materialism, nor any conceivable communist practice. Each and every one of us has experienced this in our own way: in the vanity of activism or theoreticism, in sectarian deviations or under the blows of the truncheon. This common experience, in its diversity, is the reason for our meeting and our collective activity. When the mists of “everything is possible” and “where there’s a will, there’s a way” dissipate, the violent reality remains with its determinations and its openings; then there remains the necessity (for us) to detect them, to debate them and to make them known.

Reality is our antidote to the magic of words: it frees us from the sleepwalking of intellectuals, including revolutionaries, locked in castles of words. But it is not enough without will or direction. Our ambition is to offer ourselves and those who share our horizons demanding and readable analyses, covering entire swathes of reality too often neglected by the saturated market of “critical thinking”. Among these: political economy, technology, and international conflicts in their growing entanglement.

Reality challenges us: our jobs or studies often keep us away from the transformation of matter, confined to handling words and numbers. We cannot change who we are or our livelihood at will. On the other hand, we can combat *wishful thinking*—the illusion that verbal overkill or a “revolutionary phrase” transforms reality. Fortunately, facts are stubborn; so are we. To the 1968 slogan “take your desires for reality”, we oppose “take reality for desire”: because dogmatism and the denial of reality as protection against a

world that has become more threatening are today the ultimate proof of the inability to understand it, and above all to transform it.

The reality we will report on this site is not a raw reality: it is a reality mediated by writing—and, what's more, sifted through theoretical schemes laden with history and meaning. Reality is not transparent—if that were the case, all science would be superfluous. There are, however, ways of handling thought that obscure the object of analysis more than they make it intelligible. This is why curiosity, sobriety, explanatory clarity, respect for the readership, and humility in the face of the unknown are essential. Enough lyricism and empty rhetoric: reality demands responsibility.

We don't agree on everything, and that's a reality, too. But we're starting from a sufficient common ground, and we're convinced that, in the current situation, there's a significant challenge in relearning the effort of collective work within a relatively impersonal, open, and expansive framework. We're betting that along the way, we'll manage to establish a coherent working method, and that we'll also see clearly defined political lines emerge. The success of such a bet rests largely on circumstances beyond our control. Still, we've floundered enough with informal approaches to know that we need to invent something else, and quickly. Reality encourages us to do so.

Original article available in French at: <https://realite.world/qui-sommes-nous/>



Alex G. Parke (1990-2023)

Alex lived for a world where everyone would be happy and safe and have no reason to fear being different. During the course of his too-short life he refined some crucial lessons from his experiences, lessons which he returned to over and over again; lessons from his extensive travels, from occupations and share houses, from blockades, mass protests and sabotage, from theoretical study and conversations with others, from accountability processes and popular education, harm reduction and mutual aid. Over the years these lessons grew in depth and expression but retained a consistent basic coherence. By way of tribute to our friend we're sharing our best approximation of some of these insights here.

1. Our politics has to make our lives better in the day-to-day, and not only on the outcome of a 'win'. Why do people stick around? Because of warmth, intimacy and the satisfaction of needs. Our movements cannot grow without it. Alex's tea trays and unwavering encouragement reflected a practical commitment to this theoretical insight.
2. Really being there for each other requires leaving the confines of the scene. Recognising the importance of our own needs and relationships cannot be an alibi for isolating ourselves in subcultural enclaves. Without building mass forms of organisation, even with people we do not like or easily get along with, we will never have the means to go beyond simply firefighting the world as it exists.

3. We need to get better at addressing social conflicts. We cannot build anything sustainable without being actively prepared to deal with inevitable conflicts and harm. We all fuck up, even in our attempts at reparation, but to say no one is disposable will remain a platitude unless we actually realise that in practice.
4. We need a tangible vision of what we're fighting for. Many of us are so lost that we fight without any real conception of what it would take to remake the world or of how our own activity could relate to that goal. Without cultivating our ability to imagine a better life, from the many libraries of the world commune to the tram-café of revolutionary Melbourne, we'll remain that way, fatalistic and resigned.

Alex wanted another life; it remains ours to fight for.

Basalt Plains Collective





Afterword to the Italian version of **Red Dust**

Raffaele Sciortino

This piece provides a short, critical appreciation of the ongoing work of the communist collective Chuang, which over the past decade or so has consistently provided some of the best commentary and analysis of both contemporary and historical developments in the People's Republic of China. Along the way, the author also offers a rather different take to Chuang concerning the rise of capitalist social relations in the PRC, views that are fleshed out a little more in his 2024 book The US-China Rift. We hope to explore this and other related matters in a future interview with Raf. In the meantime, in offering this text as one contribution to ongoing collective reflection on these questions, we thank Porfido Edizioni for granting permission to publish its translation.

Taken together with Chuang's earlier text, *Sorghum and Steel*,¹ *Red Dust*² provides a dense but compelling description of the whole parabola of the first fifty years of the People's Republic of China. *Red Dust*, in fact, resumes the narrative from where its predecessor had left off, namely with the end of the Cultural Revolution's high phase and on the eve, at the end of the 1960s, of maoist China's geopolitical turning point through the rapprochement with Nixon in 1972.

Chuang's intention here is not simply or primarily descriptive or historiographical, even if such literature is widely drawn upon in the process. Rather, theirs is an attempt to read this parabola from a communist point of view. In terms of drawing up a balance sheet that can explain what the PRC has become, more is required than taking account of its present capitalist nature – one must investigate how this came to be, so as to make sense of where the People's Republic is headed. This is also true in terms of approach: combining an analysis of China's internal dynamics with that of its external environment, addressing the evolution of the capitalist world market and the geopolitical factors of the Cold War while considering the specific nature of the country's whole historical path since Imperial days, all the time placing the social dynamics of class relations (and relations in turn between classes and the state) at the centre of the picture.

Beyond these undoubted merits, we will need to wait for the final part of Chuang's historical and political reconstruction (flagged for the concluding volume of what will then become a kind of trilogy) before being able to formulate any well-grounded overall assessment of the collective's ambitious interpretation, which in the complexity of its analysis has few equals in the field of marxist research.³ Still, in light of these two texts, it's already possible to draw up a preliminary judgement of the essential features of their work. These to my mind can be summed up by two fundamental theses that the comrades of Chuang have advanced, through the clear periodisation of the PRC's history into two phases. The first thesis (which pertains to the first phase) is that of the "socialist developmentist regime", spanning from the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, up to roughly the 1970s, when that regime met decisive obstacles to its continued existence, let alone

its further development. The second thesis concerns the transition to capitalism beginning in the 1980s, albeit this outcome is deemed clear and irreversible only by the end of the millennium, which is where the account in *Red Dust* concludes. In other words, this transition arose not from any necessity due to the PRC's earlier development, but instead from the intertwined outcome of contingent social-economic dynamics and political choices.

What follows are some critical reflections regarding these theses, addressing the nature of the Chinese social-economic formation, a question which is both the blessing and the curse of marxist debate (as was already the case with the nature of the Soviet Union).

The term “socialist developmentist regime” implies that the China which emerged from the democratic peasant revolution constituted neither a capitalist nor a socialist mode of production. Rather, the term encapsulates a blocked – or better, suspended – transition capable of evolving in either direction. Setting aside the empirical particulars of the “hybrid” nature extensively described in Chuang’s two texts, which in themselves demonstrate nothing beyond their theoretical framework, we can speculate on the political (and not simply analytical) reasons that lie behind this stance. To begin with, there is the determination not to get trapped within the dichotomy between a neo-maoism pining for a socialism lost, and a *radical* “western marxism” intent on demonstrating the immediately capitalist nature of the PRC (even at the cost of obliterating – all the more so today – what sets it apart from imperialist formations). Beyond this, there is the perfectly proper desire to emphasise the revolutionary break with a China that had itself earlier fallen prey to imperialism.

At the same time, such a definition seems oblivious to the dialectic between economic and political factors duly considered on a global scale, which not even the Chinese revolutionary dynamic could elude, and which alone can provide that solid marxist criteria able to evaluate its nature and evolution. This is a dialectic able not only to address the activity of all the internal and external social factors – thus avoiding treating the “Chinese question” isolated in time and space from the dynamics of the world market – but equally does not rule out the possibility of phases wherein “economics and politics, production and distribution, and even the interests of the dominant and dominated classes, appear completely topsy turvy”.⁴ This is what escapes Chuang. On the one hand, they isolate People’s China, whose “socialist” nature (if only at the regime level) was deemed possible thanks to an autarchic (!) separation from the world market lasting three decades. On the other hand, they overlook the Chinese revolution’s “phase delay” in relation to the parabola of the global counterrevolution, which had already largely come about by 1949. This made it impossible for an anti-imperialist democratic uprising in a backward country such as China to make the political “leap” to a socialist transition – not impossible in an absolute sense, but certainly requiring conditions that were beyond the limits of any one individual country. Such conditions were no longer given by that point, however, and this is the crucial factor (rather than this or that social-economic condition, or this or that political measure) that could have decided the success or otherwise of that possibility (and quite apart from the nature of the Communist Party itself – something we pass over here, but one that would need to be placed “in phase” with all the other variables).

None of this detracts from the global importance of the Chinese revolution as the trigger for the cycle of anti-colonial revolutions during a period when the proletarian revolution stood at a low ebb. Given this, however, the objective of industrialisation (or “developmentalism”, to use Chuang’s terminology) and modernisation, which characterised the maoist period, were – beyond the “socialist rhetoric” – completely within a process of transition to capitalism by a backward society devastated by colonial exploitation, Japanese occupation and war. This transition was the outcome of an anti-imperialist democratic revolution carried out by peasants, and led by a populist and Jacobin party in place of a weak national bourgeoisie. The consequence of Chuang’s “methodological nationalism” is to exclude completely from the maoist period those “curbings of the world market”² that are exercised over every country, even the most isolated. Along with overlooking the phase delay mentioned earlier, this has certain relevant consequences, which we can only touch upon here.

In the first place, to speak of a “regime” rather than a mode of production (or better, of the passage to a new dominant mode of production) inevitably places the emphasis on the organisation of productive forces by a political and/or technical entity – as if the latter, instead of objective relations of production (even if entangled in various ways with the residues of previous modes of production) was sufficient to bind together a social-economic formation. From this follows a tendentially subjectivist reading of the Chinese experience and its abrupt transitions, to which we will return below.

In the second place, and consistent with their fundamental theses, Chuang rule out discussion of the originary accumulation of capital

within the evolution of agrarian relations, and of those between the countryside and the city, that characterised the whole initial phase of the Chinese experience. This is a crucial point. In our view, what is implicit here, along with their basic assumption, is the view that the only genuine typology of that long process is the one presented by Marx in Volume One of *Capital* (is this the influence of the Brenner debate?). As it happens, in Volume Three Marx had warned that “the form in which the capitalist mode of production finds landed property at its beginnings does not correspond to this mode. The form that does correspond to it is only created by it itself, with the subjection of agriculture to capital; and in this way feudal landed property, clan property or small peasant property with the mark community is transformed into the economic form corresponding to this mode of production, however diverse the legal forms of this may be”.⁶ This means that – contrary to what the Russian populists and others thought – as soon as the capitalist mode of production emerges from feudalism (along a West European, or if you like, Japanese trajectory) no agrarian order could in its own right act as an insurmountable obstacle to the implantation of capitalism, thanks to the pressure of powerful internal and international social factors able ultimately to push even small peasant village estates, teetering between a natural economy and mercantile circulation, over the edge and into the embrace of the capital relation in agriculture. To this we could add that, as Chuang seem to recognise on occasion, a market for land already existed in pre-revolutionary China, and that poor peasants had to struggle not against large feudal property (the thesis of stalinism), but against merchant capital and usury capital usurping the land in the form of small tenancies, and who, in cahoots with the comprador urban bourgeoisie subordinate [*prona*] to foreign capital impeded the fruition of the capitalist form of agrarian development

[*impediva un pieno sviluppo agrario di tipo capitalistico*]. That such development then had to face the extreme parcelisation of land subsequently seized by peasants is a problem that is typical of a difficult capitalist accumulation forced to follow a slow process of concentration based upon small and tiny units of production – a process that still persists in today’s China. The highs and lows of this development, alternating between pushes towards decentralisation and efforts to “collectivise” from above, are part of this picture, and cannot be disconnected from a world system tending towards imperialist stabilisation in the wake of the Second World War, whereas they have nothing to do with either a possible option of socialist transition, or a presumed blockage in the transition towards market relations.

Beyond this, the capitalist features of this accumulation, with all their peculiarities, are not in any way limited to the countryside, as Chuang’s own analysis makes clear. Beginning with the imperative of industrialisation in very difficult conditions, both internal and external – see the discussion in *Sorghum and Steel* of the First Five Year Plan – the problem is raised of the extraction of surpluses in the countryside in order to fuel industrial accumulation, a typical problem facing countries that come late to capitalist modernisation. This has equally typical effects, such as the growing disparity between urban and rural life, and the formation of an industrial proto-proletariat, particularly in the coastal cities. Chuang recognises that, even in the absence of a genuine national bourgeoisie bound together by an effective domestic market, there is clearly no lack of commercial and even small/medium industrial entrepreneurs, who were never completely abolished later through nationalisation. In a similar manner, the very presence of manufacturing concerns, which Chuang describe as atomised and

almost autarchic, awaited only the formation of a genuine national economy that could integrate them into an network of exchange with nationalised large-scale heavy industry (which not even Chuang considers as socialist). How, in this tortuous and tormented process, industrial labour power did not become a commodity – and thus that a genuine proletariat remained unformed before the 1980s-1990s – is a mystery for which these texts are unable to provide a satisfactory answer.

Finally, the implications for the State's role in post-revolutionary China. Very briefly, a certain overvaluation of the overarching role of the party-state stems from the connotation of a developmentalist regime, whereas paradoxically its vector function of capitalist accumulation in the form of nationalised large scale industry is undervalued. According to Chuang, the absence of a specific configuration of the social relations of production (suspended between two possible transitions) makes the State responsible as the regulator [*ordinatore*] of a generic economic “development” in terms of a “political mandate” that in some ways recalls the imperial centre within the Asiatic mode of production (here defined as “tributary” à la Samir Amin). Separated in this manner from the torturous dynamic of capitalist accumulation, political affairs become fractional struggles between different apparatuses of party bureaucrats (the party being the backbone of the State), in a cycle that alternates between ossification and revitalisation. The Chuang collective know very well to be wary of a completely ideological reading in terms of a clash between “two lines” that is common to maoism and a certain kind of Western leftist journalism. But the fact remains that, within its reconstruction, it is precisely this alternating – manifesting itself in the tension towards development between pushes towards the

concentration and the decentring of the productive forces – that at a certain point will see the formation of a bourgeois class at the intersection between the delineation [*enuclearsi*] of a stratum of “red engineers” in large scale industry, and of sectors already existing outside the bureaucratic apparatus. Once again, while Chuang never equates bureaucracy with class, the nexus between politics and economics seems the wrong way around, with classes appearing in some way to be the product of political evolution. And all this despite the lucid way in which these texts know how to direct the reader’s attention, describing with efficacy the class dynamics underpinning seemingly indecipherable political shifts (here the analysis of the Tian An Men mobilisations from the 1970s inwards is exemplary).

This point leads us directly to our final reflection on the cipher of Chuang’s political philosophy. We could label this “*contingentism*“, if for no other reason than its (presumably generational) affinity with the so-called postmodernist phase. China’s definitive transition to capitalism is presented as the contingent and “emergent” result of the dynamics in question, rather than being a moment in the historical sequence of forms of production and related class structures. The unintended consequences of the “socialist” project’s ends are explained through the (far from trivial) use of the tools of the most recent, non-gradualist evolutionary biology. But while it’s understandable that one would want to avoid ex post (“teleological”) historical explanations, the systemic theory’s applied logic simply weakens the specific differences between modes of production, in the process obliterating the fact that these unintended consequences are set up [*si configura*] with qualitatively different forms [*modalità*] in various typologies of social relations. What seems to escape Chuang is the unique

entwining of causality and chance that is peculiar to the capitalist mode of production – the iron determination of the “thing-like” [*cosale*] dependence upon the logical structure of capital with the apparent (in the sense of Hegel’s *Erscheinung*, effective and necessary manifestation) randomness [*casualità*] that bourgeois thought has always christened as the “free choice” of social actors. On the contrary, a determinism centred on the *conditioned* nexus of social factors understood in their historical sequence not only does not erase the persistent differences between large scale geographical areas and historical phases, but also permits an understanding of those structural contradictions immanent to the system that express themselves through the class struggle. Rather, it is the dialectic between invariance and difference that seems to disappear within the conclusions of the texts under examination, if it is true that the peculiarity of Chinese capitalism ultimately seems to be not so much “overcome” (or raised to a higher level) as obliterated in the homogenous steel cage of “capital’s material community”. We will have to wait until the final part of Chuang’s trilogy to see whether our reading is justified or not, since that volume will have to analyse China’s current place within the global capitalist system, and with the reality of a Chinese proletariat that (however “reformist” at present) must confront not only its own national bourgeoisie, but also that of the imperialist West. Will Chuang continue to insist upon China’s asymmetrical relationship with US imperialism, despite the People’s Republic’s own mighty economic ascent, or will it fall back into the *radical* attitude that places all capitalist actors (at best) on the same footing? In any event, we can expect that any critique of their work will only be possible thanks to the very contributions that Chuang have made to the marxist reflection upon the “Chinese question”.

-
1. <https://chuangcn.org/journal/one/sorghum-and-steel/>
 2. <https://chuangcn.org/journal/two/red-dust/>
 3. We should at least acknowledge the efforts made in “real time” by the fortnightly *Il Programma Comunista* in the late 1950s/early 1960s and – in a different register – those by Pierre Souyri in the post-trotskyist journal *Socialisme ou barbarie*.
 4. Amadeo Bordiga (1953), “La batracomiomachia”, *Il Programma Comunista* 10,
https://www.quinterni.org/archivio/filitempo/115_1953_batracomiomachia.htm
 5. Leon Trotsky (1930), *The Permanent Revolution*,
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/prge.htm>
 6. Karl Marx (1991), *Capital: Volume III*, London: Penguin, p. 755, translated by Ben Fowkes.

